

# **Is Whitehead's Concept of God Consistent?**

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Whitehead's Process Philosophy

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## Is Whitehead's Concept of God Consistent?

*God is not to be treated as an exception to all metaphysical principles, invoked to save their collapse. He is their chief exemplification*(PR, 343)

*If God as an actual entity exhibits principles different from those exhibited in temporal actual entities, then we would have to judge that Whitehead's philosophy is inconsistent. (Hosinski,184)*

In Whitehead's metaphysics two principles stand out to me as having received a great deal of emphasis in his exposition: the ontological principle, and the principle of relativity. Although these two principles figure prominently throughout Whitehead's treatise, their relevance to this paper is that both of these principles are front and center in Whitehead's discussion of God's dipolar nature.

Firstly, the ontological principle is expressed in a number of different ways in *Process and Reality*: "This general principle will be termed the 'ontological principle.' It is the principle that everything is positively somewhere in actuality, and in potency everywhere." (PR,40) ; more concisely as "[T]he reasons for things are always to be found in the composite nature of definite actual entities—..." and "The ontological principle can be summarized as: no actual entity, then no reason." (PR, 18). So if there is any effect to be prehended it must originate in the nature of some actual entity. It cannot just pop into existence from nothing.

For example, when I see a post on a social media platform, I know with certainty that it did not just appear there out of thin air, it originated in an account on that platform that is owned by an actual person (ignoring entirely "bot" accounts, which, while they have a deceptive and illegitimate origination are still owned by some actual person.) While the platform does supply the potential for a posting to be made, as well as, the terms of service, which is the repository for the eternal objects governing the use of the platform, the posting does not arise spontaneously from the platform itself.

Secondly, the principle of relativity is to be found in numerous places, the most concise being, “[it belongs to the nature of a ‘being’ that it is a potential for every ‘becoming.’ This is the ‘principle of relativity.’” (PR 22 cf. 166), but first, and most importantly, in Whitehead’s preface where he states, “All relatedness has its foundation in the relatedness of actualities; and such relatedness is wholly concerned with the appropriation of the dead by the living—that is to say, with ‘objective immortality’ whereby what is divested of its own living immediacy becomes a real component in other living immediacies of becoming.” (PR xiii, xiv) The importance of this statement of the principle lies in his emphasis on “the appropriation of the dead” being that which no longer enjoys subjective immediacy “by the living” being that which is presently enjoying its own subjective immediacy.

Going back to our social media posting, while the poster is in the process of writing the post, she will gather together her thoughts on a topic (prehensions) and spend some effort to integrate these thoughts into a completed post. This is the subjective immediacy of the post, and as such it is completely private. No one is able to read (prehend) or respond to her post in this phase. It is the poster in her enjoyment of self-creation. It is not until she has completed her composition and presses the <ENTER> key (the satisfaction) that any other individual is able to respond to it. At that point, however, the post in question is dead. It no longer has any subjective immediacy attached to it, but it begins its objective immortality whereby any authorized individual on that social media platform is able toprehend it so as to become a real component in that individual’s immediacy.

While this example demonstrates Whitehead’s principle of relativity, it also brings to the fore his reliance on the epochal theory of time. This theory is exemplified by Whitehead’s quotation of William James:

“Either your experience is of no content, of no change, or it is of a perceptible amount of content or change. Your acquaintance with reality grows literally by buds or drops of perception. Intellectually and on reflection you can divide these into components, but as immediately given, they come totally or not at all.” (PR 68)

Whitehead invoked this theory to overcome Zeno’s paradox<sup>1</sup> which gives rise to the notion that an entity which is becoming is never a complete thing, and therefore cannot be perceived by another entity. “Thirdly, in the epochal theory Zeno’s difficulty is met by conceiving temporalisation as the realisation of a complete organism.” (SMW 127) This concept is indispensable to Whitehead’s concept of an actual entity, which becomes not in a continuous dribble, but as one complete drop. James, to the best of my knowledge does not refer to this doctrine as “the epochal theory of time,” but he explains it vividly:

If a bottle had to be emptied by an infinite number of successive decrements, it is mathematically impossible that the emptying should ever positively terminate. In point of fact, however, bottles and coffee-pots empty themselves by a finite number of decrements, each of definite amount. Either a whole drop emerges or nothing emerges from the spout. If all change went thus drop-wise, so to speak, if real time sprouted or grew by units of duration of determinate amount, just as our perceptions of it grow by pulses, there would be no zenonian paradoxes or kantian antinomies to trouble us. (James (Kindle Locations 1810-1814)

The overall effect that this has on Whitehead’s actual entities is to make them atomic, i.e., separate and indivisible. He rescues them from this atomism by introducing prehensions, which are feelings of relatedness between entities. “But atomism does not exclude complexity and *universal relativity*. Each atom is a system of all things.” (PR 35, emphasis added) Nevertheless, the actual occasions, in and of themselves, are discrete.

In the case of the social media post, this means that the post does not come in a continuous stream. It comes all at once after the author presses <ENTER>. Prior to that there is no post,

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zeno%27s\\_paradoxes](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zeno%27s_paradoxes)

subsequent to that there is a post, but there is never a point where there is  $\frac{1}{2}$  a post, or  $\frac{1}{4}$ , or  $\frac{1}{8}$ , etc., it is always a complete entity which can be prehended by others.

Lastly, an epoch does not have a scale, it is a duration. It may be short, as in the duration of an actual entity, or long, as in the duration of a geological epoch. The point is that it is a complete duration with a beginning, a middle, and an ending.

And then there was God. Whitehead's concept of God developed through his metaphysical writings, first, in *Science and the Modern World*, and then, more extensively in *Process and Reality*. When he first introduces God he writes, "In the place of Aristotle's God as Prime Mover, we require God as the Principle of Concretion." (SMW 174) Later in the same work he also speaks of God as the "principle of limitation." (SMW 178) In *Process and Reality*, Whitehead introduces a dipolar nature of God already in his Chapter 1 on Speculative Philosophy. He describes the primordial nature as creativity's "primordial, non-temporal accident." (PR 7) He introduces the consequent nature of God "...how the composite natures of the organic actualities of the world obtain adequate representation in the divine nature." (PR 12) Further on he explains the primordial nature thus, "The primordial created fact is the unconditioned conceptual valuation of the entire multiplicity of eternal objects. This is the 'primordial nature' of God." (PR 31) The consequent nature is described as God's physical prehensions of the actual occasions of the world, "He shares with every new creation its actual world; and the concrescent creature is objectified in God as a novel element in God's objectification of that actual world." (PR 345)

Here I wish to draw attention to the following distinction between the two natures; The primordial nature is *eternal*, thus not affected by time, and does not change. Furthermore, "...he is 'deficiently actual'" (PR 343) The consequent nature, on the other hand, is conscious, and

*everlasting*, i.e., a single, continual concrescence that never ends. “The consequent nature of God is his judgment on the world. He saves the world as it passes into the immediacy of his own life.” (PR 346) Two important things to note here: firstly, the primordial nature is not really actual, it is potential, thereby calling into question how that nature conforms to the ontological principle; secondly, the consequent nature is a continuous concrescence, thus abandoning the epochal theory of time. These two issues raise the question of how the actual world is able toprehend God at all if neither nature conforms to *all* of the metaphysical categories.

There are several ways to get around this problem. Charles Hartshorne proffers the notion that God is a series/society of occasions in the same way as actual entities, as John Cobb, Jr. explains, “God, then, at any moment would be an actual entity, but viewed retrospectively and prospectively he would be an infinite succession of divine occasions of experience.” (CNT 170) There is little consensus on this idea, particularly since it would involve God being “dead” after any specific satisfaction, but “There is a becoming of continuity” (PR 35) which should apply equally to God.

Whitehead himself suggests that there is a satisfaction of God (Cf. PR 88), but it is unclear to me how this satisfaction occurs.

Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, in *The End of Evil* tenders the notion that the solution to the issue has to do with the reversal of the poles. For an actual occasion, the concrescence begins in the physical pole, and finishes in the conceptual pole. For God the process is the opposite, beginning in the conceptual pole (primordial nature) and moving to the physical pole (consequent nature). Whitehead associates the superjective nature of God with the primordial nature. Suchocki, seizing upon this, writes, “Since God’s conceptual valuation involves positively every conceivable possibility, eliminating none through negative prehensions, there is

no way in which the satisfaction of the envisagement can be essentially altered.” (Suchocki 142)

She goes on to state, “... the satisfaction of God can be a component of the divine nature without requiring any deviation from the satisfaction or consequent change in God’s essential character. There are simply no new possibilities which could alter the satisfaction.” (Suchocki 142)

However, Cobb puts a slightly different spin on this when he writes, “If God is understood to provide different initial aims to each occasion, and in each case just that aim that is ideally suited to it, then God seems, in the provision of the initial aim, to be taking account of the world in all its change.” (CNT 138)

I would add that God’s satisfaction cannot derive from one pole or the other, regardless of the order, since God is in fact a unity, therefore any ongoingness or incompleteness in the consequent nature must surely affect the satisfaction in the primordial nature.

Finally, there is one other solution to this issue, and that is to abandon entirely the epochal theory of time, as Whitehead seems to do with the consequent nature, and allow that there really is a continuity of becoming, and that Zeno is wrong that an entity which is becoming cannot be prehended. Something to think about.

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